**How to walk with teens who struggle with depression and anxiety**

**Practical steps to point them to hope**

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I work as a biblical counselor primarily with teens and kids. Fresh in the field, I do not want to hold up my limited experience as an indicator of our culture or make overgeneralized conclusions. My observations, however, line up with evidence-based research surrounding teenage anxiety and depression. The problem of anxiety and depression in teenagers seems to have increased, and the struggle to find helpful means of coping persists.

According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), anxiety and depression fall under the most commonly diagnosed mental disorders in young people under the age of 18 (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). The research found in the *Pediatric News* journal also indicates that depression, suicide rates, and anxiety have increased (Swick & Jellinick, 2019). With anxiety and depression on the rise, what can we do in our spheres of influence in order to engage wisely with teens struggling in these areas?

**A biblical perspective**

From a biblical perspective, community and connection serve as conduits for growth. God designed us for relationships (Gen. 2). God did not intend for man to walk through life alone. We see clearly the relational aspect divinely created within us from the very beginning. Thus, it makes good sense that relationships would serve as instruments of healing. We have the opportunity, then, to relationally connect with the teens in our lives to help them navigate the murky waters of anxiety and depression.

Oftentimes, in the midst of anxiety or depression, vision narrows. We tend to zoom in on the current troubles. Little problems turn into big problems that seem almost unbearable to endure. We begin to feel hopeless and helpless, and then the despair and anxiety kick in. Who will we point our teens to when that happens?

**“As we walk with teens struggling with anxiety and depression, we have the beautiful opportunity to point them to Jesus Christ, who sees, understands, and cares.”**

Our greatest help and hope comes from the Lord. Throughout Scripture, we read of men and women who experienced real emotions. They dealt with significant suffering. Specifically, the Psalms give us beautiful examples of experiencing deep emotion while running to God in the midst of those heavy feelings. We are given permission to feel the hard emotions and also welcomed to bring them to our mighty yet compassionate Father. And Jesus urges us to come to him with our weariness and our burdens (Matt. 11:28). This reorientation anchors our souls back to truth that gives us the endurance to bear up under suffering that may not cease during our lifetime.

**Practical steps**

Here are a few practical steps that will help us point our teens to Jesus.

1. Perspective: Offer teens a different perspective. Reorient their gaze from the present suffering to Christ and the big picture. Ask questions like: “What feels heavy right now?” “How can I support you best right now?” “How might you see this situation from a different perspective?”
2. Redemption: After affirming their feelings and normalizing their experience, we can point them to Jesus. In Jesus, we have redemption, hope, and a future. If your teen’s experience reminds you of a certain story in Scripture or a specific passage, share it with them.
3. Awe: Jesus came to the earth to walk as a man. He sympathizes with our weaknesses, and he is the God of the universe. That reality should lead us to praise the God that would come to earth for us. Encourage your teen to keep a gratitude journal—a list of all the things they are thankful for. They can download a gratitude journal app or write it in a notebook. If your teen wants to take it a step further, encourage them to say a prayer of thanks to God, who has provided all these blessings.
4. Inspire: We have the opportunity to instill hope and inspire our teens to walk a different path than the world. God walks with us. He helps us. He strengthens us. He holds us. He sustains us.   
   Be honest with your teen about times you have been or currently are facing anxiety. This honesty not only builds connection, but it gives you the opportunity to model facing anxiety with courage from Jesus. Invite them into a conversation. You can say something like, “I am anxious, too. I don’t know how this situation will turn out, and that makes me afraid. Here is what I am doing to run to Jesus when I feel worried. What do you think?”   
   In addition, exploring how other men and women of faith dealt with their anxiety or depression can inspire teens, as well. Hearing others’ stories of struggle and faith lets them know that they aren’t alone and it provides a model of someone trusting Jesus in the midst of adversity. Here are some examples: David (Psas. 6, 27, 56); Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36-39; Mark 14:32-36; Luke 22:39-45); Corrie ten Boom (*A Hiding Place*); and Joni Erickson Tada (*Jonia: An Unforgettable Story)*.
5. Surrender: As we walk through life, we do have a decision to make in whether or not we will surrender to Jesus. As we walk with teens, we will have the opportunity to work through moments of surrender with them. Who will they choose to follow: the world or Jesus? The battles of anxiety and depression oftentime happen in the mind. Help them evaluate: What am I tempted to believe in this moment? Is it true/untrue? How can I replace this with the truth of Scripture?
6. Endure: When we choose Jesus, we then have strength to endure through trials, anxiety, and depression. This endurance in the midst of anxiety and depression with joy and peace tells the world that a different way exists. We act differently because Jesus has changed us. He walked a different way, which we reflect every time we respond to anxiety or depression with our eyes firmly fixed on Jesus Christ.

Although we might not be able to guarantee complete freedom from anxiety and depression, we can help our teens prepare for future moments of anxiety. Self-regulating tools are God’s grace to them in the wake of hard emotions. Here are a few examples:

* Breathing Exercises
  + [Box breathing](https://erlc.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/pasted-image-0.png)
  + 4-7-8: Inhale for 4 seconds. Hold for 7 seconds. Exhale for 8 seconds. Repeat at least three times.
  + Breath counting: Take a few deep breaths. Settle into a pattern of normal breathing. Each time you exhale, count “one.” Keep counting until you reach five, and then repeat as needed.
* Grounding Exercise
  + Identify 5 things you see
  + Identify 4 things you feel
  + Identify 3 things you hear
  + Identify 2 things you smell
  + Identify 1 thing you taste

**Conclusion**

While life does not get better or easier by following Jesus, he gives us supernatural strength to walk with him faithfully. This produces character and joy in the process (Rom. 5:4-5). As we walk with teens struggling with anxiety and depression, we have the beautiful opportunity to point them to Jesus Christ, who sees, understands, and cares.

What are we offering the teens in front of us? If it isn’t Jesus, it is a simple solution that offers the “just” remedy. “Just take care of yourself.” “Just think happy thoughts.” “Just tune out negative voices.” You get the idea. Good advice doesn’t start with “just.” It starts with Jesus. Look to Jesus. He offers himself, and in that offering, he gives peace and hope that significantly outweighs our present sufferings (2 Cor. 4:17) as we seek to fix our gaze firmly on him.

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